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SUBJECT: BELARUS: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CONDITIONS ONE MONTH OUT

¶1. (SBU) With the release of the last three Belarusian political prisoners earlier this month, attention has turned to the conduct of Belarus' parliamentary elections September 28. The need to make significant progress in improving electoral conditions has been stressed by both the U.S. and EU -- most recently through the visits to Minsk of EUR DAS David Merkel August 21-23 and European Commission Deputy Director-General for External Relations Hugues Mingarelli August 28-30. Key concerns include full access for OSCE/ODIHR observers, including to the voting process and ballot count, registration of opposition candidates, access to the voters and media by all candidates, and participation of the opposition in electoral commissions at all levels.

¶2. (SBU) OSCE/ODIHR Observation Mission Head Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens is in regular contact with relevant GOB officials on the question of observers' access to all phases of the electoral process, and conditions for candidates' media access have been announced by the Central Election Commission (CEC). An exceedingly small number of opposition members -- less than one percent of the total -- have been named to precinct election commissions, where most of the fraud has been conducted in the past. So far, the CEC claims that it is unable to change the content of the precinct commissions, which by law must be finalized by a certain date in advance of the voting -- in this instance, August 13 was the deadline in question. The UDF has also complained that employees from labor "collectives" have been designated as precinct commission members, with their supervisor as commission chair, and that in other cases professional subordinates of regime-named candidates are on the commissions. (Comment: If true, the commissions would clearly fall far below acceptable standards. End comment.)

¶3. (SBU) Candidate registration offers a somewhat better picture. Sources differ, but the UDF has told us that 77 of their 98 candidates have been registered, or about 78.5 percent -- roughly the same level registered for the last parliamentary elections in 2004 (157 of 188, or 83.5 percent). Some prominent opposition figures have been registered, including Alyaksandr Mekh (who gained notoriety for being fired after he refused under Belarusian KGB pressure to give up political life) and Volha (Olga) Kazulina (daughter of former political prisoner Alyaksandr Kazulin), but others such as Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) First Deputy Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka were not.

¶4. (SBU) However, the GOB is keenly aware of the international scrutiny, and the number of registered opposition candidates may still increase. Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Valentin Rybakov confirmed to Charge August 28 that appeals by those rejected for registration would be very carefully reviewed during the week of September 1. Vyachorka told Charge August 29 that he would appeal, and would be encouraging others to do so as well.

Comment  
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¶5. (SBU) Given frustration with the imperfect conditions to date and the entrenched position of some in Belarusian civil society to boycott the entire electoral process, many opposition members are

feeling pressure to abandon the elections early. The BPF council will meet August 29 to discuss the party position, and the UDF will meet with candidates August 31 to debate whether they should continue to participate or not. At this point, we believe that the majority will stick with the process and will at least postpone any decision to withdraw from the campaign. The regime knows that the best way to foster the continued participation of the democratic forces in the short term is for further candidates to be registered through the appeals process next week. We are cautiously optimistic that the appeals process will yield more candidates.

MOORE  
CLOUD